The art of Mexican cooking. Culinary agency and social dynamics in Milpa Alta, Mexico.


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Abstract

Drawing on Alfred Cell’s ‘art nexus’ theory, this dissertation considers cooking as a kind of artistic practice. The focus of this study is the culinary culture of barbacoa-makers in the community of Barrio San Mateo, Milpa Alta in Mexico City. Mexican cuisine is analysed at three levels - the social and culinary contexts of the production and consumption of barbacoa; the daily life of women and especially their domestic cooking tasks; and the dynamics of hospitality, as expressed in the cycle of fiestas. Barbacoa is pit-roast lamb, and the production of it is an important means of livelihood in San Mateo (along with the cultivation of nopales, and other agricultural activities). Barbacoa - which is served during fiestas, and also eaten in the market on Sundays and holidays - is produced by married couples whose social environment both creates and is created by the practices surrounding the preparation of the dish. The division of labour observed in making barbacoa is directly related to normative gender roles, i.e. those performed in the normal domestic context. Women are associated with cooking, which includes making salsas and other foods which require laborious culinary input. They appear to be restricted both by the expectations of men and by the demands of the kitchen. But male and female gender roles are shown, in this dissertation, to be complementary, and they are not in general characterized by the hierarchy of men over women. Examination of the fiesta cycle further reveals that the basis of social interaction is the conjugal unit, both at the level of families (through links of compadrazgo, co-parenthood), and at the level of the community (through the mayordomia, the ‘cargo system’). Women may be viewed as culinary artists whose body of work is the corpus of Mexican cuisine. The source of their culinary mastery is located in the individual’s hand or sazon de amor, a touch of love. The development of ‘traditional’ cuisine is therefore born of the domestic realm as a product of artistic innovation and technical skill, both in a culinary and a social sense. Counter to Goody’s theory, this high cuisine is not the product of a hierarchical society, as such, but rather develops from the highly-valued work of women as wives, mothers, and family cooks.

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Mexico City’s only rural area blanketed with forests and farms, Milpa Alta is famed for cultivating nopal, maguey and heirloom corn, among other crops. The road from village to village in Milpa Alta snakes through fields and around ancient volcanoes, slowly climbing up the mountains that overlook the beast of a city to which it formally belongs. We take a truck to his property, part of a farming cooperative ceded to the campesinos (farmers) following Mexico’s decade-long revolution that ended in 1920, which focused heavily on agrarian reform. In his village, the city’s only rural area covered with forests and farms, his generation of elders is the one that mostly carries the torch of their direct connection to the Aztec past. Share: “Milpa Alta, México Air Pollution: Real-time Air Quality Index (AQI)”. Air Quality Data provided by SINAICA - Sistema Nacional de Información de la Calidad del Aire en Mexico (aire.df.gob.mx) and INECC - Instituto Nacional de Ecologia y Cambio Climatico (sinaica.inecc.gob.mx). Note that the measurements for PM2.5 (fine particulate matter) and PM10 (respirable particulate matter) are taken from the station MX:Sinaica/Ciudad De Mexico/Valle De Mexico/Milpa Alta. Detailed Air Quality Data. Most Recent News. Rent from people in Milpa Alta from EUR 100/month. Book your place online and feel at home all over the world with HousingAnywhere. 29 rooms, studios and apartments for rent in Milpa Alta, Mexico. €200. per month included. Private room at Viaducto Tlalpan. Available from 25 Mar 2019. Furnished • 1 Bedroom • 6 m². €310.